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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM IZ

SUBJECT: ASSESSING TAWAFUQ'S THREAT

REF: A. BAGHDAD 2468

1B. BAGHDAD 2479

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Tawafuq's threat to quit the government in seven days has created a political crisis at the very moment when we need the CoR and the Iraqi leadership focused on addressing benchmarks. Though Tawafuq has previously backed down from such threats at the last minute, it would be unwise to assume that the Sunnis are once again merely grandstanding. Even in the absence of a clear triggering event, the combination of Tawafuq's long-standing grievances and the growing animosity between VP Tariq al-Hashemi and PM Maliki may well result in the resignation of the six Tawafuq ministers. Septel will follow with thoughts on how we might engage with both Tawafuq and the Iraqi government to avert that outcome. End Summary.

TAWAFUQ,S DEMANDS: WHY NOW?

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12. (C) Tawafuq announced (ref B) July 25 that its six ministers (who had boycotted Cabinet meetings since early June following the attempted arrest of the Culture Minister) would quit the government in seven days if the party's demands were not met. Tawafuq's timing could scarcely be worse (we need both the Council of Representatives and the political blocs to be focused on benchmarks) and is somewhat puzzling in the absence of a clear Shi'a provocation, which has generated Shi'a accusations that the Sunnis are trying to topple the government in order to prejudice the policy review in September. The Sunnis counter by arguing that the Shi'ites intentionally sabotaged the benchmark process to achieve the same result. Moreover, the Sunnis claim that they are responding to the cumulative weight of numerous provocations: the Minister of Culture mess; allegations that a colonel in the Iraqi security services is terrorizing Sunnis with impunity; Maliki's storming out of a 3 1 meeting after refusing to discuss security issues, while claiming that he had security files on all Tawafuq leaders; an MOD investigation of Tawafuq; and raids against the homes of 30 of 44 Tawafuq parliamentarians.

13. (C) All of this is playing out against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between VP Hashimi and Maliki (ref A). Looking beyond the Maliki-Hashimi dynamic, the broader problem is a Shi'a leadership so fearful of a Ba'athist resurgence and so intent on institutionalizing Shi'a rule in Iraq that it supports sometimes unlawful measures to suppress the Sunni insurgency and to limit Sunni access to real political participation. Even the most charitable critics of PM Maliki's government concede that many of Tawafuq's long-standing concerns have largely gone unaddressed.

WHY IS THIS TIME DIFFERENT?

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¶4. (C) While many of our contacts note that Tawafuq's playbook seems to be limited to generating periodic political crises, few believe the Sunni Arabs are grandstanding. Most seem to believe that Tawafuq will follow through on its threat rather than backing down at the last minute (as Tawafuq has done in the past). If that happens, the Shi'ites and the Kurds are likely to say "good riddance."

¶5. (C) Consequently, it would be a mistake to discount Tawafuq's threat. Our sense is that Hashimi is serious, and that his actions are rooted more in emotion -- including his intense frustration at being locked out of decision making, the 3 1 structure notwithstanding -- than in a rational assessment of Sunni interests. Moreover, the Tawafuq leadership is genuinely angered by the fact that it has not been able to deliver on Sunni demands (most of which, at least on a declaratory level, are consistent with our reconciliation aims) in exchange for its support of PM Maliki's government. Septel will follow with thoughts on how we might engage with Tawafuq and with the Government of Iraq to avert Tawafuq's departure.

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